

GETTING POLITICALLY ACTIVE

BY DR. ROBERT J. SHAW

EARLY IN MY CAREER, I DID A lot of work in icing research. My research group had been trying to get money to upgrade our icing research tunnel, and it wasn't going well. We weren't considered mainstream enough, I suppose. We were given a certain budget every year and we were told to do the best we could with that money.

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Out of nowhere came a front-page news story about a horrible plane crash that was due to icing. It wasn't the icing that we were studying but, nevertheless, icing research had new currency (yes, pun intended). Suddenly, the money we were asking for—and more—was made available to us.

I wasn't directly involved in bringing that money to the program. I stood by on the sidelines and said, "Well, I don't understand how the politics of this works exactly, but it seems to be benefiting me and so that's nice." Detachment served me fine in that case. Many years later, however, I was involved in another political football match and, this time, the ball didn't bounce my way.

On My Own

In 1999, the program I was working on, High Speed Research (HSR), was terminated. I could spend pages talking about why it was terminated, but at the risk of sounding like sour grapes, let me just say this: Over a few weeks (literally, a few), we lost our national agenda and priority. We went from the top program to the one that you didn't want to talk about anymore.

It was a very upsetting experience. Many of the people who worked for us wanted to know what they did

wrong. The answer was, "You didn't do a damn thing wrong." There were forces at work beyond our immediate control.

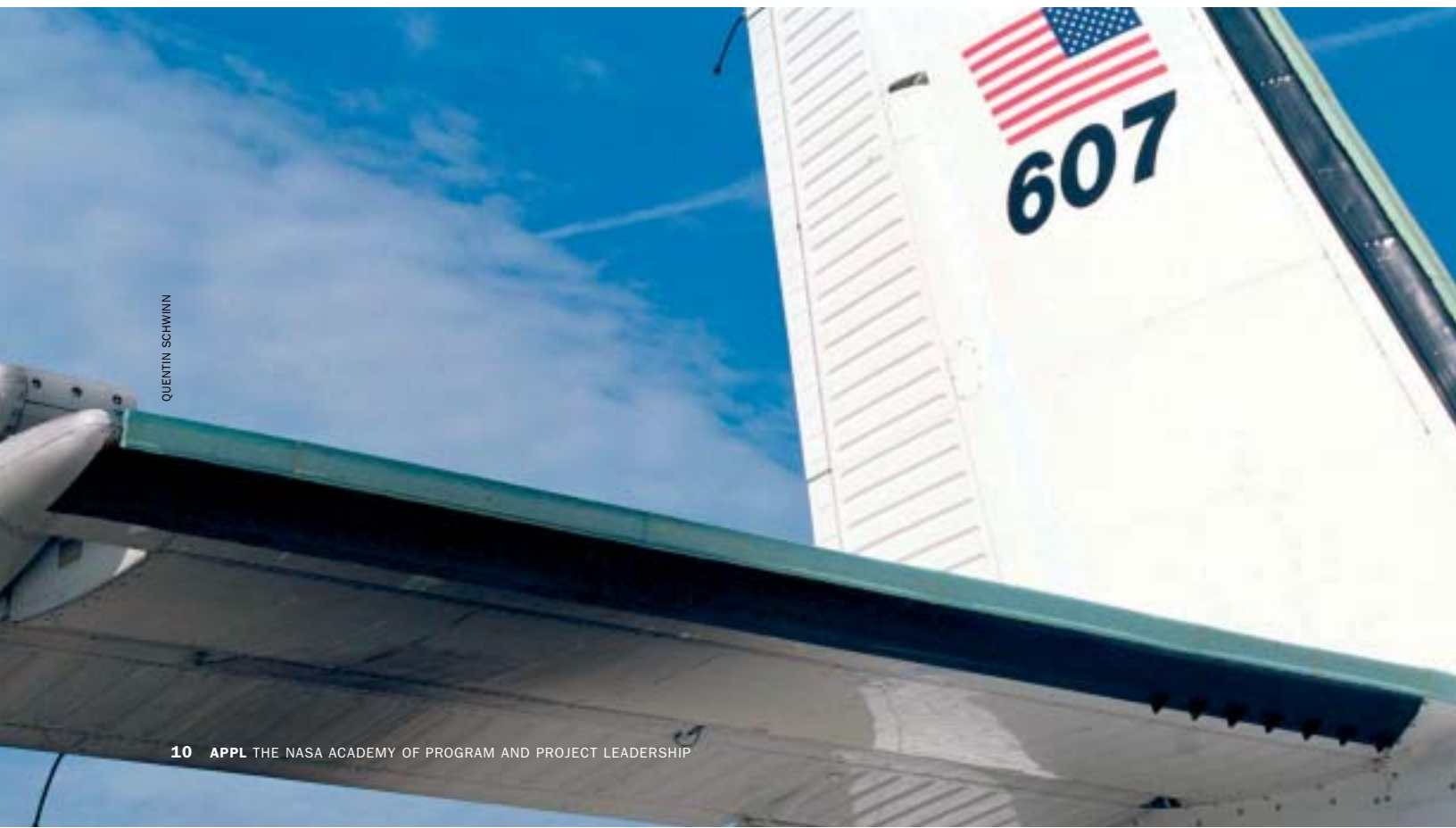
The program was terminated around Thanksgiving. While I was at home for the Christmas holidays that year, I put up shelves in our basement. I worked out some of my frustration with work on my home project. I still have a lot of drill holes in the wall, and there are names associated with each one of those holes.

Shortly after the HSR program was cancelled, Dan Goldin, the NASA Administrator at the time, told my boss that he wanted to start a new program—somewhat similar to the program that had been terminated but different enough to be considered revolutionary. My boss told me that he wanted me to do this job.

I wasn't terribly excited about jumping right back into the political fray. I told him point blank, "I don't want it." He said, "Oh, yes, you do." So, that was the end of that discussion.

Politics, Redux

The Ultra Efficient Engine Technology Program (UEET) is a collection of technologies aimed at impacting future gas turbine engine designs. Some of



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the people assigned to UEET worked in the HSR program and the Advanced Subsonic Technology (AST) program, which was cancelled at the same time. Though these NASA employees and industrial partners suffered collateral damage when the old programs were terminated, I needed to get them to buy in to the new program.

I spent a lot of time explaining my vision for the new program—and listening to their complaints. That was okay; people need to vent, and you’ve got to understand that. I believe that by communicating with all the people associated with this program and by developing a relationship with them, we developed a high degree of support for the program—to the point that some of our contractors have taken the initiative to spread the message that the UEET Program deserves continued funding.

I want to make very clear, though, that I have never encouraged any industrial partner to go out and lobby Congress; that’s not an appropriate activity for NASA personnel. I think we have a strong, clear vision in UEET and we deliver timely, high-quality technical products. This vision and our success in realizing the vision inspire people to take appropriate action.

I have also spent a good deal of my time with our stakeholders at NASA Headquarters. Over the years, the leadership in the Office of Space Technology has included people of very different backgrounds, experiences, and approaches to program planning. Each and every one of these individuals has been a good person, but they come from different perspectives. My advice to anyone heading up a research program at NASA: Understand your stakeholders’ perspectives, or run the risk of seeing your program being killed off in an instant.

And that is also my advice to all program and project managers. You must engage yourself in understanding the environment in which your program or project operates. To put it simply: You can run, but you cannot hide from politics. Either you will influence the politics that surround your program, or politics alone could determine the fate of your program. I learned the hard way that a manager can’t afford to be detached. •

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LESSONS

- Projects can, and do, succeed because of politics. And they can fail due to politics, as well. Politics does not have to be a dirty word, if it means working closely and openly with customers and stakeholders; it is an essential approach that requires continuous dedication of time and attention.
- Project management is a people industry. Gaining the trust of your followers will grant you more influence than any formal authority.

QUESTION

How do you get buy-in from the stakeholders on your projects?



“I suppose we all come to project management through unconventional paths,” says **DR. ROBERT J. (JOE) SHAW**. While working on his PhD at Ohio State University, Shaw didn’t expect to become a project manager, or to spend his career at NASA. Explains Shaw: “My advisor at Ohio State told me that NASA is a great place to go for five years, learn, gain experience, then get out and get on to the real thing. For me, the real thing was to become a university professor. But as that great philosopher of our time, Yogi Berra, said, ‘When you come to a fork in the road, you take it.’” After starting out as a Division Manager in the Icing Program at Lewis, now the John Glenn Research Center, Shaw gravitated to a formal project management role leading the High Speed Research Project. Most recently, he has managed the Ultra Efficient Engine Technology Program Office and started up the Vehicle Systems Program.